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Vietnam off religious violators listing

WASHINGTON (BP) — The U.S. State Department has removed Vietnam from its list of the world's worst violators of religious freedom, in spite of advice to the contrary from a nonpartisan panel that advises the government on such issues.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice redesignated seven of last year's "countries of particular concern" (CPC) for the infamous list and named Uzbekistan for the first time as a CPC. The seven returnees as CPCs are Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan.

Vietnam, however, became the first CPC to make enough improvements to be upgraded from a State Department classification reserved for governments practicing or permitting particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

"Though important work remains to be done, Vietnam can no longer be identified as a severe violator of religious freedom" as defined under federal law, said John Hanford, the U.S. ambassador at large for international religious freedom. "This marks the first time that a country has made sufficient progress as a result of diplomatic engagement to be removed from the CPC list, and we view this as a very important milestone."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a nine-member panel established by a 1998 law to advise the White House and Congress, had urged Rice only a week before the announcement of the latest CPCs to keep the communist country on the list.

Commission Chair Felice Gaer acknowledged to Rice in a Nov. 6 letter the Vietnamese government had made "some positive steps" but told her that sources in Vietnam indicate "restrictions and abuses" cited by the State Department in designating the Southeast Asian country a CPC in 2004 continue.

"Religious leaders remain confined, only a tiny fraction of the churches closed since 2001 have been reopened, forced



MIXING BUSINESS, WITNESS — Because of political and social restrictions in Vietnam, some Christian businessmen use their storefronts as opportunities for sharing Christ with customers. Others visit with fellow church members in order to witness to lost family members. (BP photo)

renunciations of faith continue, as do restrictions on and harassment of all of Vietnam's diverse religious communities," Gaer said. "All these abuses occur less frequently than in the past; however, there remain severe concerns in all these areas."

Gaer also told Rice dropping the CPC designation would "remove an important and positive incentive that has stimulated U.S.-Vietnamese discussions on religious freedom." Religious liberty has been a "diplomatic priority with productive results" since the State Department designated Vietnam as a CPC, Gaer said.

The USCIRF chair also urged Rice to express U.S. concerns about religious liberty when she attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting last month in Hanoi, Vietnam, which was also attended by U.S. President George W. Bush.

In defending the State Department's decision at a Nov. 13 briefing, Hanford said Vietnam had enacted laws against coerced renunciations since 2004 and there are only isolated reports of such acts.

Protestants and Roman Catholics have reported improved circumstances in Vietnam, and some groups that previously were outlawed have gained the freedom to practice their beliefs, he said.

"Designation as a CPC is not and must not simply be an exercise in naming and shaming," Hanford said. "The purpose of designation is to signal to a country that it has severe problems related to religious freedom that need to be addressed. And it's also a signal that the United States wants to work with that country to help overcome those problems."

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission in Nashville, is a

USCIRF commissioner. He joined six other human rights leaders in a Nov. 13 letter asking President Bush to include U.S. human rights leaders in his delegation to Vietnam for the APEC meeting and to continue to press the Vietnamese government to "respect religious freedom."

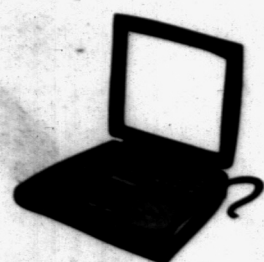
A joint statement from the Vietnamese and U.S. governments after a Nov. 17 meeting between Bush and Vietnam President Nguyen Minh Triet said the American president stressed the need of "full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms."

Triet told Bush of Vietnam's new laws regarding religious liberty, and the leaders agreed the human rights dialogue should be comprehensive. There was no indication Bush had human rights leaders in his delegation.

Bush advocated religious freedom after his wife Laura and he attended briefly a Nov. 19 worship service at Cua Bac Cathedral in Hanoi.

He described the "freedom to worship as you see fit" as the basic liberty. "My hope is that people all across the world will be able to express [religious freedom]," Bush said. "And it's our way of expressing our personal faith and, at the same time, urging societies to feel comfortable with and confident in saying to their people, 'If you feel like praising God, you're allowed to do so in any way you see fit.'"

Uzbekistan gained inclusion on the CPC list after increasing its restrictions on religious expression, Hanford said. "The already extremely restrictive religion law has been further tightened, congregations have been harassed and deregistered and fines have been dramatically increased," he said.



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Nov. 7: more than meets the eye

All the dust has now settled from the ugly November 7 elections, and the pundits are eager to tell us how it turned out and who was turned out and what the change of power in Washington, D.C., really means. Virtually all the talk on all the networks all the time has dealt with the Democrats taking over Congress for the first time in 14 years, replete of course with predictable predictions on what's going to happen when the new Congress convenes in January.

There were many more issues across the country related to the voting on November 7, but we haven't heard that much about those items from the major national news media outlets, which continue to view just about everything through a Washington, D.C. filter. We shouldn't overlook the other notable events of November 7.

For instance, voters in Minnesota elected the first Muslim to Congress. Keith Ellison, a 43-year-old Democratic state legislator and defense attorney, won out over two opponents to claim the seat of a retiring congressman.

Ellison was raised Roman Catholic in his hometown of Detroit, and converted to Islam as a 19-year-old college student. "We were able to bring in Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists. We brought in everybody," he told MSNBC.

The November 7 election also produced what is now a majority of states in America with constitutional amendments protecting the traditional definition of marriage as between one man and one woman. Ratifying constitutional amendments were Colorado (56%-44%), Idaho (63%-37%),



South Carolina (78%-22%), South Dakota (52%-48%), Tennessee (80%-20%), Virginia (57%-43%), and Wisconsin (59%-41%).

Arizona's proposed constitutional amendment defining marriage was the only loss of the day (51%-49%), but under Arizona law the amendment's supporters can try again in 2008.

Mississippi is among the states that had already passed a constitutional amendment defining marriage. The total of states with amendments now stands at 27.

Colorado also turned back Referendum I, which would have legalized domestic partnerships for same-sex couples, by a margin of 53%-47%.

The pro-life movement suffered four defeats on Election Day. South Dakotans repealed Referred Law 6, an abortion ban passed last year by the state's legislature, and also failed to pass a parental notification law that would have required that par-

ents receive notification before their minor child has an abortion. California and Oregon also voted down parental notification laws by wide margins.

In Missouri, voters narrowly approved an initiative to fund stem cell research and therapeutic cloning after a nasty campaign that drew in such national figures as actor Michael J. Fox and radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh.

Three states defeated measures that would have legalized the use of marijuana. Colorado's Amendment 44 failed by a nearly 2-1 margin, while Nevadans and South Dakotans also voted against similar proposals.

Gambling votes on November 7 were a mixed bag, with three victories for anti-gambling forces and two defeats. In Ohio, Issue 33 that would have allowed 31,500 slot machines at nine sites lost by 56%-44%. In Rhode Island, voters turned down a proposed casino in West Warwick to be operated by a local Native American tribe and Harrah's Entertainment. Nebraska voters declined to allow electronic keno, although the state already allows keno on paper.

However, South Dakota rejected a repeal of video lottery in that state, and Arkansans approved Constitutional Amendment I, which lifts the ban on charitable bingo and raffle games in the state.

As one can readily see, there was a lot more to the November 7 elections that was not reported — or minimally reported — by Big Media. These were not small issues, but we heard very little about most of them. As Christians, we need to arm ourselves with information and get to the bottom of every story that affects us.

The information is out there. We just need to make the effort to get it, and then get involved.

GUEST OPINION:



Nothing rosy on Rosie's views

By Will Hall, executive editor
Baptist Press, Nashville

we have separation of church and state."

Conveniently, on the one hand she uses terrorists to create a negative caricature of Christians — but just as conveniently, on the other hand she uses the imagery of American mothers and fathers to suggest that terrorists are no threat.

The irony is that research shows evangelical moms and dads, those committed to their faith and not just nominally affiliated with a faith tradition, make the best parents and that children thrive in these Christian homes. A snapshot of the research shows:

- Christian couples who regularly attend church and actively practice their faith in the home are happier and experience divorce 32% less than secular couples.

- Evangelical mothers hug and praise their children more

than other mothers. Meanwhile, evangelical fathers, more than any other group of men, are affectionate to their wives and children and are more involved in their children's lives.

- Children in homes of faithful Christian parents score better scholastically, enjoy better physical and mental health and participate less in risky behavior than their peers.

Unfortunately, critics like O'Donnell don't want to make an honest comparison between "radical" Christianity and radical Islam. The contrast is too stark in favor of those sold out for Christ — those who live their faith by active participation in church and by exemplifying Christ-like behavior in the home.

Instead, naysayers about Christianity like O'Donnell would rather ignore the facts and argue the exceptions or the margins as the rule.

The reality is that radical Christianity has the potential of wonderfully transforming America and the world (moms and dads and all), not bringing either to its knees in fear.

Regrettably, O'Donnell's only brushes with transformation have been superficial, the product of marketing herself for her career: She hid her homosexuality to become Mary Tyler Moore-like, the "queen of nice" who was in love with Tom Cruise, but only as long as she hosted her own television show and worked in feature films.

After ending her talk show stint, she morphed into a raunchy standup comedienne, drastically changing her looks (complete with a masculine haircut) and personality (marked by foul-mouthed routines); now, she's back again to the presentable look (new hairdo and wardrobe) of a talk show host, although she's more of a bully than in her past daytime role.

O'Donnell is the adoptive parent of three children. Not much is public about her home life, except she lives with a lesbian partner. What is clear, though, is that if she wants to be the mom in a loving home that fosters the best of health and growth for her children, what she needs most is the radical Christianity she so abhors.

That's just my view.

Lebanon conflict leads to medical missions

SOUTHERN LEBANON (BP) — Sherri Redding listens intently to her stethoscope. It's 10 a.m., and the makeshift Southern Baptist medical clinic in southern Lebanon is already buzzing. Patients line up outside the clinic's door in plastic lawn chairs. Inside, a handful of doctors and nurses are moving at full tilt.

Redding manages to tune out the commotion. Right now, the nurse practitioner is focused on the man at the other end of her stethoscope. His name is Abdullah and he's complaining of back pain and breathing problems. What Redding doesn't know is that while she listens to Abdullah's lungs, she's also healing his heart.

Redding is part of a Southern Baptist medical relief team ministering to Lebanese communities ravaged by the recent Israel-Hezbollah war. Abdullah, like many others, has come to the clinic because treatment is free and because there are no doctors left in his hometown.

"During the war a lot of people evacuated to Beirut, even left the country," Redding said. "But not everyone has come back, and there are still areas where the [local] physicians haven't returned. ... We want to be there to fill the gap."

Most come seeking routine medical care. The morning of Abdullah's visit, the team treats a baby suffering from a mouth fungus, a diabetic woman with a wound that's slow to heal and a grinning 6-year-old named Ahmed. He's come so nurses can check a row of stitches on his head. Bashfully, Ahmed explains that a friend hit him with a rock.

By nightfall, the team has seen nearly 40 patients.

With the fighting more than two months behind them, volunteers haven't had to contend with gunshot or shrapnel wounds, trauma one might expect in a war zone. Instead, work-related injuries are on the rise as rebuilding efforts intensify. One man is treated for a cut from a jagged piece of rebar, another limps in after dropping a concrete block on his toe.

Mending broken bodies is only part of the team's task in Lebanon. Despite their experience and expertise, medicine can do only so much to make their patients whole again.

Children shriek in terror at the booming sound of soldiers detonating unexploded bombs. Some families have seen everything they own reduced to rubble. Many are thankful simply to have survived the war without losing a loved one. Others are not so fortunate.

"Their spirits are wounded and they're very afraid," said Elaine Brown, a volunteer nurse from a Southern Baptist church in Georgia. "The suffering is just so real it's hard to see, especially the children."

"We heard so many people say over and over, 'We're used



HEALING, HELPING — Nurse Cherie Martin (center) helps clean and bandage a Lebanese man's toe that was crushed by a concrete block. "We're really here to heal hearts, not bodies," said Martin, a volunteer from Apple Valley, Calif. "I want to share the love of my Savior and let people know there is hope." (BP photo)

to this; it's our way of life.' That was really disturbing to me."

There is hope amid the devastation, however. Redding and other Southern Baptist relief workers have witnessed firsthand how the Lord is using them to bring healing to this war-torn community.

"Right now the medical needs are not that huge, but the spiritual needs are great and people are really seeking," Redding said. "A large percentage of our patients talk about feeling stressed — not feeling any peace. It gives us an opportunity" to provide real encouragement.

"We pray that the Lord brings people to the clinic whose hearts He has already prepared."

Wrapping up her exam, Redding hands Abdullah a blister-pack of Pepto-Bismol-colored pills and a book as a gift to his family. Inside the front cover she writes, "I pray God brings healing to your body, peace to your heart and blessings to your family."

Abdullah's deep-set eyes betray he is deeply touched by her bedside manner.

"I've never actually had anyone listen to my lungs before," he tells her. "I've seen lots of doctors and they just take my pressure and tell me to leave."

"They don't actually listen to me. I've never had anyone take this much time with me."

"Our spiritual needs and our physical needs are intertwined," Redding explained.

"If someone is sick or hurting, they may not be able to think about their spiritual needs until their physical needs are met."

Though volunteers weren't always able to talk about their faith directly, the medical team wasn't short on alternative means to share the Good News. Doctors and nurses frequently asked to pray with patients. Sometimes, sharing Jesus' love was as simple as sharing a hug. Brown, a geriatric nurse, recalls meeting an elderly woman who visited the clinic.

"She was so hungry for contact, to hug somebody, to have somebody hug her — to love her. She latched on to me and didn't want to let me go. I loved returning that hug. I don't even know her name, but I will never forget her face."

Opportunities to love others also came outside the doctor-patient relationship. When the medical team's van blew a tire, Brown was able to share

hope with a young man named Nassir who helped change it. Another day, the wife of a high-ranking Lebanese government official visited the clinic. She came with an entourage of about 30 women to thank the volunteers for their work.

Representing Christ wasn't always as easy as talking with a new friend or checking blood pressure. The medical team also dealt with its share of communication chaos and cultural faux pas.

"It was difficult because of the language barrier; we didn't always have interpreters," Brown said.

"If you're creative, there are always ways you can [express love and compassion] through a smile or a motion or whatever."

Looking back

10 years ago

Temple Church, Hattiesburg, enters into a long-term lease on 53 acres of 16th section land in Lamar County, with the intention of expanding the ministry and having one church in two locations.

20 years ago

A 32-year-old Liberian man admits to murdering Southern Baptist missionary Libby Tarlton Senter, 47, and her 10-year-old daughter Rachel after Robert Senter, husband and father of the victims, offers the man forgiveness.

60 years ago

West Jackson Church organizes Wednesday night, Nov. 12, with D.A. McCall, executive secretary of the state convention, speaking. J.L. Sullivan is called as pastor. A total of 26 charter names are on the church roll, with more to be added next Sunday.



MISSISSIPPI
BAPTISTS

THE SECOND FRONT PAGE

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**YOU CAN RESPOND
RIGHT NOW!**

*Simply share the following prayer
with God in your own words:*

1. Lord, I admit that I need you.
(*I have sinned.*)
2. I want forgiveness for my
sins and freedom from eternal
death. (*I repent.*)
3. I believe Jesus died and rose
from the grave to forgive my
sins and to restore my rela-
tionship with you.
(*I believe in Jesus.*)
4. By faith, I invite Jesus
Christ into my life. From this
time on, I want to live in a lov-
ing relationship with Him. (*I
receive Christ as my Savior
and Lord.*)

*"But as many as received him,
to them he gave the right to become
children of God, even to those who
believe in his name." (John 1:12)*

*If you make a decision for
Jesus Christ today, contact a
local Baptist church for spiritu-
al guidance.*

THE WIDOW'S MITE, A LITTLE KID'S CAT, AND YOU

While I was standing on Highway 90 after Katrina, I met a little girl's pastor. Actually, we were standing where one side of Highway 90 once was. Several men who obviously had been down there working and helping with the rescue and cleanup effort were walking toward me. One of them stepped forward with his hand out, and as we shook hands he told me that he was the pastor of a church in Florida. I asked him which church and he told me the name. It was a Presbyterian church. Jokingly I said to him, "Well, you look more like a Baptist to me than you do a Presbyterian." He laughed and said, "Well, that is because I was raised a Baptist and actually my ordination was in a Baptist church." Neither he nor I had time to go into the story of how or why he moved from his Baptist roots to his Presbyterian place of service. I began to shake hands with the men who were with him, and standing there in the middle of what was once a highway and was now sand, we talked, agonized, and then prayed together.

As we visited I asked them where they were working and what they were doing. Their church had a disaster relief team, and right after the storm they

loaded up, headed west, and found more than enough to do. They brought supplies, money, and muscle and begin to put it all to use under the hot coastal sun.

As the pastor told me about the special offering they took in his church on Sunday morning, he was overwhelmed by the generosity of his people to say, "We want to help," but no gift to the offering was more moving to him than the story of a young elementary school child in his church. Upon hearing of the destruction and need and the offering that was about to be taken, she waited until after church to say to her parents that she needed to go home and get some money. They explained to her that they gave some money to help but she wanted to give her money. They did not know what money she was talking about until she reminded them of what she was in the process of doing. She had a pet cat that had died, and she

wanted another cat. In an effort to teach their young daughter some vital principles in life related to work, anticipation, and delayed gratification, her parents had told her that she would have to save up her money to buy a kitten. So at every opportunity when she got some money she was putting it away for that wonderful day when she could get her own kitten. Her total savings so far was just over \$11. The parents were about to experience some amazing emotions, and their child was about to learn a glorious truth taught by our Lord. The girl said that she wanted the people in Mississippi, who needed so much, to have her money and she would wait until later to get her cat.

While our world teaches the principle of "Get, and you will be happy," Jesus knew the truth and was the Truth in teaching "Give and you will be happy." In fact, He said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."



Directions

Jim Futral, executive director-treasurer
Mississippi Baptist Convention Board

Is it a blessing to receive? Absolutely! All of us have enjoyed moments of opening presents and receiving gifts that we did not expect. It is good to receive, but far beyond the joy of getting is the joy of giving.

If you only learn to get and fail to learn to give, you will live life on about two cylinders. A little girl with her \$11-plus joined with thousands of others in a great moment of giving. If you would like to give to be a blessing to folks who are in desperate need, we welcome you to experience what a little girl did over in Florida. It could be that you could wait to buy your cat later or you may even discover that you don't even need the cat.

For the next few days and weeks Southern Baptists will be looking at, praying for, and asking God what He would have them do about the disaster before us — not Katrina, but a world wrapped in the darkness of wrong and lives shattered by the effects of sin. The Lottie Moon Christmas Offering is a glorious opportunity to give and bring beams of light, love, and hope to the people of the world. You may be able to do without a cat, but our world cannot live without Jesus. Bless them and you will be blessed.

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Israeli high court recognizes homosexual marriages

JERUSALEM (BP) — The land where Jesus once walked soon will recognize homosexual marriage.

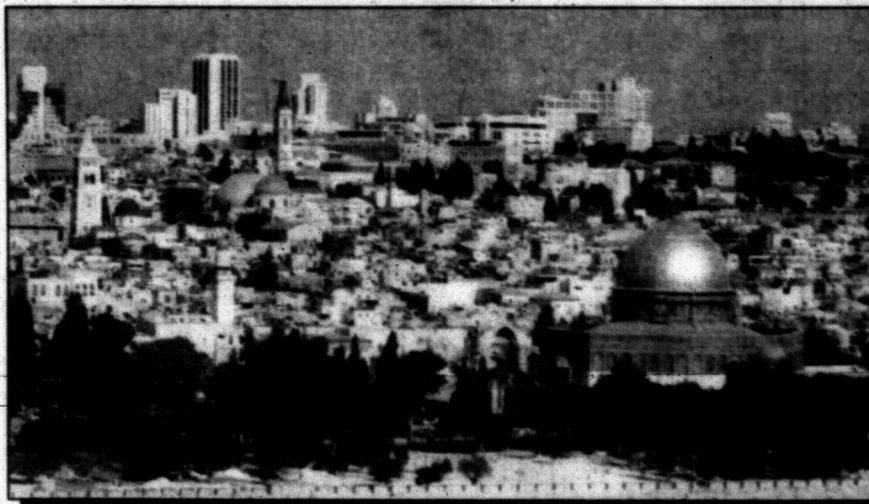
In a landmark 6-1 decision, Israel's Supreme Court Nov. 21 ordered the government to begin recognizing homosexual marriages from other countries, such as Canada. Although the decision doesn't give homosexual couples the ability to "marry" within Israel's borders, it nonetheless puts Israel at odds with countries such as Great Britain and the United States, neither of which recognizes foreign homosexual marriages.

In fact, the U.S. government doesn't even recognize homosexual marriages that occur within its borders in Massachusetts, the lone state where it is legal.

Four countries — Canada, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, and South Africa — have legalized homosexual marriage.

The ruling by the High Court of Justice — the name for Israel's highest court — gives homosexual couples the same legal benefits as traditional couples, including tax breaks and the ability to adopt. The Jerusalem Post reported. The decision forces the government to register the "marriages" like it does any other marriages.

"We don't have a Jewish state here. We have Sodom and Gomorrah here," lawmaker Moshe Gafni told Israel's Army Radio, according to the Associated Press. "I assume



MODERN JERUSALEM — Jerusalem claims the hearts of Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike — but protests from all three groups did not stop the Israeli Supreme Court from issuing a ruling that recognizes homosexual marriage in the country. (BP photo)

that every sane person in the state of Israel, possibly the entire Jewish world, is shocked, because the significance is ... the destruction of the family unit in the state of Israel."

The lawsuit was brought by five homosexual couples who were "married" in other countries and wanted to have their licenses recognized in Israel. One of the couples was Sefi Bar-Lev, 40, and Yaron Lahav, 29, the Toronto Star reported.

"This is a great step forward. But we are still at the beginning," Bar-Lev told the Star. "The law in Israel is opening up, but whether you are gay or heterosexual, the rule here is still that unless you want to marry the religious Orthodox way, you must still leave the country to get married.

So there is more struggle ahead to win the right to have civil ceremonies in Israel. But today we can see there is momentum in the right direction."

The United States has a law known as the Defense of Marriage Act preventing the federal government from recognizing "gay marriages." Homosexual activists hope to see it overturned in court someday, but the major homosexual groups have yet to file suit, saying the legal timing isn't right.

In Britain, a court ruled in July that the government isn't required to recognize homosexual marriages from Canada.

The Israeli court ruling was issued nearly two weeks after a "gay pride" parade in Jerusalem was cancelled fol-

lowing pressure from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders and concern over Islamic terrorist violence. Despite the cancellation, in recent years homosexual activists in Israel have won legal and political battles that activists in America have not.

For instance, homosexuals in Israel can serve openly in the military. America's "don't ask, don't tell" policy prevents such open service, with U.S. military leaders saying open service would harm morale and cohesion.

"[The decision] shows that the homosexual agenda is global," Peter LaBarbera, president of the conservative organization Americans for Truth, told Baptist Press. "America may have to stand alone, but we stand alone in a lot of things."

The Israel ruling, LaBarbera said, is another example of how homosexual marriage laws in one locality can have a broad impact.

"It is essential to do everything you can to protect marriage wherever you are — in a state or a nation. You have to take precautionary measures. Here in Illinois, [marriage amendment opponents] would tell us, 'We already have a law [prohibiting homosexual marriage],' said LaBarbera, whose organization is based in the state. "Well, you know full well that they want to change the law or get some sort of court edict to change the law."

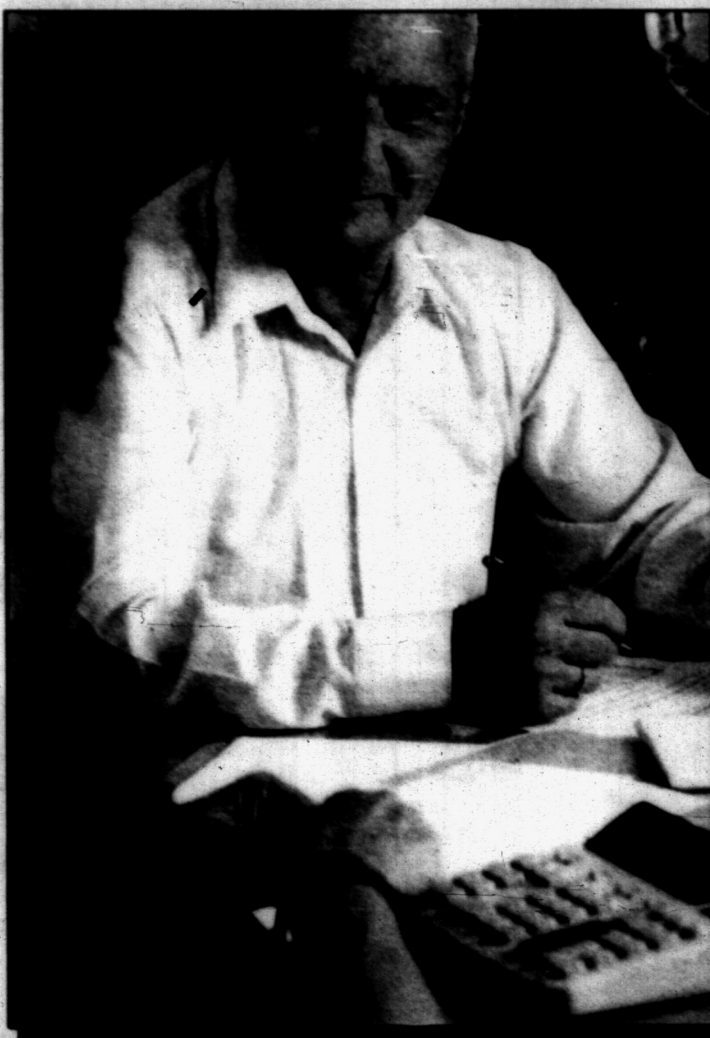
Tax-free distributions will yield eternal dividends

By Daniel Hall, Executive Director
Mississippi Baptist Foundation

With the stroke of a pen, the Pension Protection Act of 2006 (PPA) was signed into law by President Bush on August 17, 2006. Though lengthy in scope (900+ pages), PPA 2006 provides taxpayers with fresh opportunities to channel resources toward charitable causes. Perhaps the feature of this new law that has garnered the most attention is the rollover provision for Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs).

In short, the IRA rollover provision permits individuals who are 70 1/2 or older the opportunity to exclude from gross income up to \$100,000 of otherwise taxable distributions from their IRA when such funds are contributed directly to a qualified charity. Thus, PPA enables Mississippi Baptists to utilize their IRAs to offer financial support to Baptist ministries without incurring adverse tax consequences. Although the IRA owner/donor receives no charitable income tax deduction on the distribution, the donor does receive credit toward their required minimum distribution by contributing funds from their IRA to a qualified charity.

Examples of qualified charities would be churches, associations of churches, the Mississippi Baptist Convention, all of our Baptist institutions and agencies (Baptist colleges, Baptist Children's Village, etc.) and ministries associated with the Southern Baptist Convention (IMB, NAMB, seminaries, etc.). In addition, distributions to one or more of these ministries through an endowment established with the Mississippi Baptist Foundation would qualify under the Pension Protection Act.



As you explore the possibility of funding charitable ministries with proceeds from your IRA, please make note that this PPA provision is available for 2006 and 2007 with expiration set at December 31, 2007. Should you have any questions regarding this approach to charitable giving or desire to discuss other aspects of your estate planning and stewardship goals, please feel free to call the Mississippi Baptist Foundation at (601) 292-3210 or email dhall@mbcb.org.

"This material presents general information and therefore does not represent specific tax or legal advice."

EXAMPLE OF THE BENEFITS OF THIS NEW LEGISLATION

Mr. Mississippi Baptist is 71 years old and has an IRA valued at \$100,000. Because of his age, he is required to receive taxable minimum distributions that are calculated for him by the custodian of his IRA. Despite this requirement, Mr. Baptist's other sources of income are sufficient so he really doesn't need any additional revenue. In addition, he would prefer not to pay taxes on these distributions. In fact, he would prefer to make a gift to a charity to avoid both current income taxes and the possibility of future estate taxes. Prior to the advent of the Pension Protection Act of 2006, Mr. Baptist was savvy enough about tax law to realize that his charitable deduction would be limited under the former regulations.

In consultation with his CPA and other advisors, however, Mr. Baptist learned that a provision in the Pension Protection Act of 2006 would allow him to gift his IRA directly to his favorite Baptist ministries without creating any new tax liability. Inasmuch as Mr. Baptist already had planned to support Baptist work through his will, he decided to instruct his IRA custodian to remit \$100,000 to these ministries while he is still alive. By responding to this new legislation in a timely manner, Mr. Baptist avoided taxes and accomplished his estate goals while also having the joy of living to see the blessings of his Christian stewardship.

Gospel breakthroughs seen in annual IMB statistics

ST. LOUIS (BP) — Southern Baptist missionaries and their international Baptist partners baptized more than 475,000 new believers last year, started nearly 23,500 churches and began church planting among 104 people groups for the first time.

They also planted churches among 19 people groups where no Baptist churches previously existed — including 13 peoples with no evangelical churches of any kind.

These numbers come from the board's 2006 Annual Statistical Report, compiled from statistics reported by more than 2,000 separate entities — including hundreds of mission teams assigned to reach ethnic people groups, cities and other population segments.

The report, covering calendar year 2005, was received by International Mission Board (IMB) trustees during their last board meeting in St. Louis.

The report focuses on three "key result areas": engagement of unreached people groups and urban centers; advance toward church-planting movements around the world; and progress of overseas Baptist partners in engaging people groups and starting church-planting movements.

"Engaging" a people group means more than sending missionaries or even winning people to Christ. It means applying church-planting methods that enable local believers to begin finishing the task of evangelizing their own cultures.

Among the most significant results for 2005, Southern Baptist missionaries and their partners:

- engaged a total of 1,170 people groups worldwide, three-quarters of whom are classified by mission researchers as unreached (less than 2 percent of the population claiming evangelical Christian faith).

- engaged for the first time 104 people groups, 73 of whom are unreached, with a combined population of nearly 100 million.

The Jahanka of West Africa, for instance, number only about 60,000, with fewer than 20 known followers of Jesus. But they are one of the "pivotal peoples" of the area, according to IMB regional leader Randy Arnett, because they are the Muslim religious teachers who send imams to the villages of many other peoples. "They are the missionaries; they are the solid Islamic people of West Africa," Arnett told IMB trustees.

A Southern Baptist missionary couple living in a Jahanka village are winning friends. One Jahanka villager told a visitor, "They could have gone to any [people], but they came to the Jahanka. They could have gone to any village, but they chose our village. They have come with a message from God, and we're waiting for them to be able to speak our language so we can hear this message that they have brought to us."

- engaged 120 unreached urban centers, including 12 for the first time.

- started 23,486 churches, up from 18,070 in 2004, and more than 10,600 "outreach groups" (potential future churches). That brought total partner churches worldwide to 135,252, with a combined membership of 8.8 million, and outreach groups to 55,723.

In the rock-hard spiritual ground of North Africa and the Middle East, fewer than 100 Baptist churches were begun over the past six decades. "I'm here to tell you that last year we saw 101 new churches," regional leader John Brady reported. "These 101 churches came in the hardest of fights anywhere on the face of the earth for Satan to release people from darkness and allow them to come to light."

One area in northern Africa saw three churches multiply to nine, with 122 baptisms. All of those who were baptized experienced persecution, Brady said.

"But did they stand back? No, they didn't stand back. They were energized" even though some were driven out of their homes.

- baptized 475,072 new believers — about 1,300 each day or one each minute. Baptisms in 2004 totaled 477,123; 2003, 475,541.

- involved nearly 510,000 new believers in discipleship training, in addition to more than 1.1 million existing church members in discipleship groups. Those are "solid indicators showing the excitement and hunger for the Word of God," Holste said. "As people are introduced to the Bible and come to know Christ, they are baptized and nearly all are discipled in their first year of Christian growth. For the first time in our reporting history, the number of church members in discipleship training has risen above the one million mark."

- trained more than 150,000 Christian leaders in nonresidential settings (extension and correspondence course, short-term courses, on-the-job training) and more than 20,000 in residential pastoral programs.

- worked with 1,772 international missionaries sent out by overseas Baptist partners to other people groups and 3,400 home missionaries reaching out to people groups within their own countries.

"We have a significant part to play [as Southern Baptists], but the real hope comes from partners around the world that catch a vision of being a part of the Great Commission, and there's a lot of them out there," said Dickie Nelson, IMB regional leader for South America.

Nelson described Brazilian Baptists' "Radical Africa" initiative, which sends two-year missionaries to challenging parts of Muslim West Africa. He also highlighted the work of "Marie," a South American medical mission worker serving in North Africa and the Middle East.

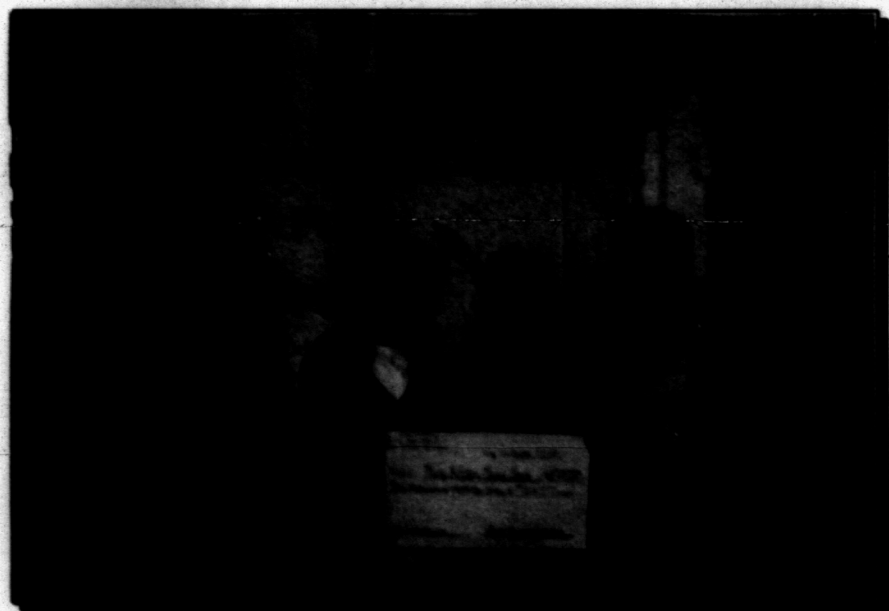
JUST FOR THE RECORD



1. GAs, Friendship Church, Golden Triangle Association



2. Youth Pastor Ordination, Lake Como Church, Bay Springs



3. Pure Water, Pure Love, First Church, New Albany



4. GAs, First Church McLaurin

1. The GAs of Friendship Church, Golden Triangle Association, recently cleaned Sunday School rooms and brought offerings to a slumber party to raise over \$453 for the Margaret Lackey State Mission Offering. Shown are Ali Jones, Rylee Bowman, Chrissy Stribling, Hannah Stribling, Carmen Jensen, and Martha Lindsey.

2. Lake Como Church, Bay Springs, recently ordained youth pastor Darrell Patrick. Shown are Patrick and pastor Kevin Bishop.

3. First Church, New Albany, gave \$1,079.23 to Pure Water, Pure Love. The money will be sent to the National WMU to be used for water filters for missionaries and the people they serve. Shown are Acteens Katie Aderholt, Claire Duff, Sidney Neal, and leader Jane Goode.

4. The GAs of First Church of McLaurin, Hattiesburg, recently entertained the congregation with a dinner theater production, Thanksgiving, Being Thankful. Shown are participants Hannah Hopstein, Hanna Jacobson, Jennifer Pittman, Violet Smith, Maria Kelly, Tiara Cooper, Charlotte Hathorn and Andrea Wilson.

5. Pastor Charles Nail and his wife, Sonja, were honored for their service to First Church, Foxworth, Oct. 29. The church presented them with a cash gift, a gift certificate to a local restaurant, and notes of appreciation from church members. Shown are the Nails.

6. West Laurel Church, Laurel, recently ordained Bill Culberson, Casey Hicks, and Jack Hilton as deacons. Shown are Culberson, Jane Culberson, Hilton, Iris Hilton, pastor Jeff Taylor, Erin Hicks, and Hicks.

7. Pleasant Hill Church, New Hebron, ordained Howell Keith Bryant as deacon Aug. 20. Shown are Bruce Young, pastor Philip Douglas, Bryant, William Holmes, and Clyde Brown.

8. Concord Church, Benton-Tippah Association, will dedicate their Family Life Center Dec. 3, 4 p.m. Robert E. Walker, pastor.

9. Cedar View Church, Olive Branch, is hosting a musical tribute to Jim Shaw Dec. 9, with music sessions at 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., and dinner at 5 p.m. Groups singing include the Bluff City Quartet, the Almost



5. Nail and wife Sonja Honored, First Church, Foxworth



6. Deacon Ordinations, West Laurel Church, Laurel



7. Deacon Ordination, Pleasant Hill Church, New Hebron

Famous Carl Crain Singers, the Crossbridge Quartet, the Geeslin Brothers, and the House Family.

er Tracy Goode spoke at the event, which attracted approximately 500 people.

10. Grandview Church, Pearl, will have a hanging of the green Dec. 3, 6:30 p.m., a Christmas cantata Dec. 10, 10:30 a.m., and a performance by the Pearl High School Chamber Singers Dec. 10, 6:30 p.m.

13. First Church, Jackson, is sponsoring Reflections on a Celebration, a gathering to honor departed friends and loved ones, December 19, 6 p.m., in the church chapel.

11. Leaf River Church, Pineville, will have their Christmas cantata Dec. 17, 6 p.m., followed by a fellowship.

12. Bay Springs Church, Bay Springs, sponsored a movie night Nov. 12, showing the movie Flywheel, written and produced by Sherwood Church, Albany, Ga. — the same church which produced Facing the Giants. Actor and assistant produc-



Wilcher
Walter Simmons, pastor.

Murphy Creek Church, Louisville, has called Justin Wilcher as youth pastor. Wilcher comes from Laurel Hills Church, Philadelphia.

Kellers tapped as MSC Missionaries of the Year

ALPHARETTA, Ga. (BP) — Ted Keller had just finished singing a stirring solo at a community New Year's Eve service in 1986 when he realized he was doing it for all the wrong reasons. His entire career in church music had been largely for his own glory, he said, rather than God's.

Keller's conviction was so strong that he left the ministry entirely for about seven years — but he returned in 1993, this time as a chaplain to the trucking community from a base at a local truck stop.

"God's given me a burden for these truck drivers that drive all across America," Keller said, noting the 3.5 million truck drivers have been described as the largest unreached people group in America. "The mission field God's called us to is to be a part of what He's doing to bring these men and women to Jesus Christ."

Keller and his wife Tammy are being honored by the North American Mission Board (NAMB) as Mission Service Corps (MSC) Missionaries of the Year. They are among approximately 2,200 missionaries currently receiving endorsement, training, and other non-salary ministry support through NAMB.

Working out of a mobile chapel housed in a tractor-trailer rig at the Columbia 20 Travel Center truck stop in Columbia, S.C., the Kellers provide counsel and encouragement, lead Bible studies, and otherwise minister to truckers, their families, and others in the trucking community. Last year alone they saw 54 individuals make professions of faith in Christ.

The Kellers said they found their

way to the ministry first as volunteers at the truck stop, and they later were asked to confront the call to leading the ministry full-time.

"He said, 'I'll never do that,' but God wanted him to and that's when he surrendered," Tammy said.

Part of the motivation also came from family. Tammy's father was a career truck driver and also an alcoholic desperately in need of Christ. And on the night of their commissioning as MSC missionaries in 1994, they saw him make a life-changing profession of faith.

"We had truck drivers and people all over the country praying," Tammy said. "He hasn't touched a drop since."

The Kellers deal with a range of problems on a daily basis, with much of their ministry related to the intense loneliness often experienced by drivers. Tammy also is able to minister to women and families, some of whom homeschool their kids on the road.

"When you have husband and wife team and you're cooped up in that truck day after day constantly, it's real tough sometimes to not have a break. So I'm there, and God uses me to speak to the wife," she said.

In just a few of their encounters:

- Ted was able to minister to a driver burned over 95 percent of his body in an accident. He eventually died, but Keller visited daily while he was in a burn center in Augusta, Ga. The chaplain had experienced 37 days in a coma himself while recuperating from heart surgery, and he knew from experience that patients often are able to hear even when they appear unconscious. He also was



TRUCKERS' OUTREACH — Ted and Tammy Keller operate a ministry outreach to truck drivers at a travel center in Columbia, S.C. The Kellers are NAMB's Mission Service Corps Missionaries of the Year. (BP)

able to minister to the family, and a trucking company even paid his expenses to travel to Canada to lead the funeral.

- One trucker came into the chapel with a gun and said he was going to kill his stepdaughter. Ted was able to share the plan of salvation with him, however, and he left with a new faith in Christ. "His whole countenance changed," Ted said. Added Tammy, "I've never seen that happened to anybody before."

- Another driver was one of the most unlovable and arrogant men they had

ever seen when they first met him, but he had found a Bible in California, saw their chapel and wanted to talk, and eventually prayed to receive Christ. Today he is preparing to take his seventh trip smuggling Bibles into a largely unreached nation.

The Kellers work in association with Transport for Christ, one of a number of organizations providing ministry to truck drivers. For more on their work, visit www.chaplainted.org. To learn more about NAMB's Mission Service Corps program, visit www.answerthecall.net/msc.

Life news roundup: Stem cell promoters optimistic

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP) — Promoters of embryonic stem cell research are predicting they could have the votes in the next Congress to overcome a presidential veto and provide federal funds for the destructive experimentation.

A more realistic outlook, however, appears to make such a result unlikely.

Rep. Nancy Pelosi, who will be the Speaker of the House of Representatives in the next Congress, has said approval of federal funding of embryonic stem cell research (ESCR), which requires the destruction of human embryos, will be a priority during the first 100 hours of the 110th Congress in January, according to The Salt Lake Tribune.

Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., chairman of the committee that oversees stem cell research, also said the issue is a major focus in the Senate, The Tribune reported Nov. 24.

The Democrats' takeover of both houses of Congress has prompted ESCR supporters such as Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Colo., to think optimistically.

"I think we have the votes in the Senate to override a veto, and we may have them in the House," Hatch said, according to The Tribune. "I think we can get there. According to some, we're only a couple of votes short, and I think I know where those votes are."

DeGette, who will be the lead sponsor of an embryonic stem cell research bill, spoke to the House's 41 new Democrats recently and said, "[T]o describe them as wildly enthusiastic about this bill would be an understatement. I think the election really sent a message to Washington that the voters want embryonic stem cell research passed."

The American Medical Association, however, said the voters did not send enough pro-embryonic stem cell research representatives to Washington to change the policy, LifeNews.com reported. The election "did not produce veto-proof congressional majorities" for ESCR funding, according to the AMA.

The House will be about 30 votes short of overriding a presidential veto, predicted James Fossett of the Alden March Bioethics Institute in Albany, N.Y., according to LifeNews.

Following November's election, the Democrats have a 231-198 edge in the House, with six races still undecided. In the Senate, the Democrats hold a 51-49 organizational margin.

In July, the House fell 51 votes short of overriding President Bush's veto of a bill that would have provided funds for research on embryos donated from fertility clinics.

The White House signaled Bush would not change his policy of opposing embryonic stem cell research funding.

Experiments using non-embryonic stem cells have provided treatments for at least 72 ailments, according to Do No Harm, a coalition promoting ethics in research. Those include spinal cord injuries, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, sickle cell anemia, and multiple sclerosis.

White spokesman Blair Jones said The Tribune that Bush already supports stem cell research, including research on bone marrow, fat and umbilical cord blood.

"Those are facts that cannot be denied," Jones said. "After careful and thoughtful deliberation with government and outside experts, there was only one moral line that the president said that he would not cross — and that is that federal taxpayer dollars should not be used in the destruction of embryos."

Bush's veto of the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act is the only one during his six years in the White House. He instituted a policy in August 2001 permitting funds for research only on embryonic stem cell lines already in existence when his policy was announced.

The Senate approved ESCR funds in July in a 63-37 vote, four votes short of a veto-proof majority.

Stem cells are the body's master cells that can develop into tissues and other cells, providing hope for the treatment of numerous afflictions. While federal gov-

ernment funding of experiments on embryonic stem cells is barred, such research itself is legal and ongoing in this country.

Many scientists contend embryonic stem cells have more therapeutic potential than their non-embryonic counterparts, but embryonic research has yet to reach clinical trials in human beings and has been plagued by the development of tumors in lab animals.

Ireland: no embryo rights

Ireland's constitution does not protect the right to life of embryos in storage, a judge has ruled.

Judge Brian McGovern wrote that "the right to life of the unborn" in the Irish Constitution does not include embryos created through in vitro fertilization, The New Zealand Herald reported Nov. 15. McGovern said the three embryos in question "are not 'unborn.'"

"There has been no evidence... to establish that it was ever in the mind of the people voting on the [Eighth] Amendment to the Constitution that 'unborn' meant anything other than a fetus or child within the womb," McGovern said in his 88-page opinion, according to The Herald.

Ireland, which is predominantly Catholic, has banned abortion except when the mother's life is threatened.

Diarmuid Martin, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Dublin, criticized the ruling, according to

the newspaper, saying in a written statement, "Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his or her existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person."

McGovern's ruling prevented a mother from having the embryos implanted over the objections of her estranged husband and the fertility clinic, The Herald reported. The mother, who was unnamed, gave birth to a girl in 2002 after IVF treatment. Her three other embryos were frozen and placed in storage.

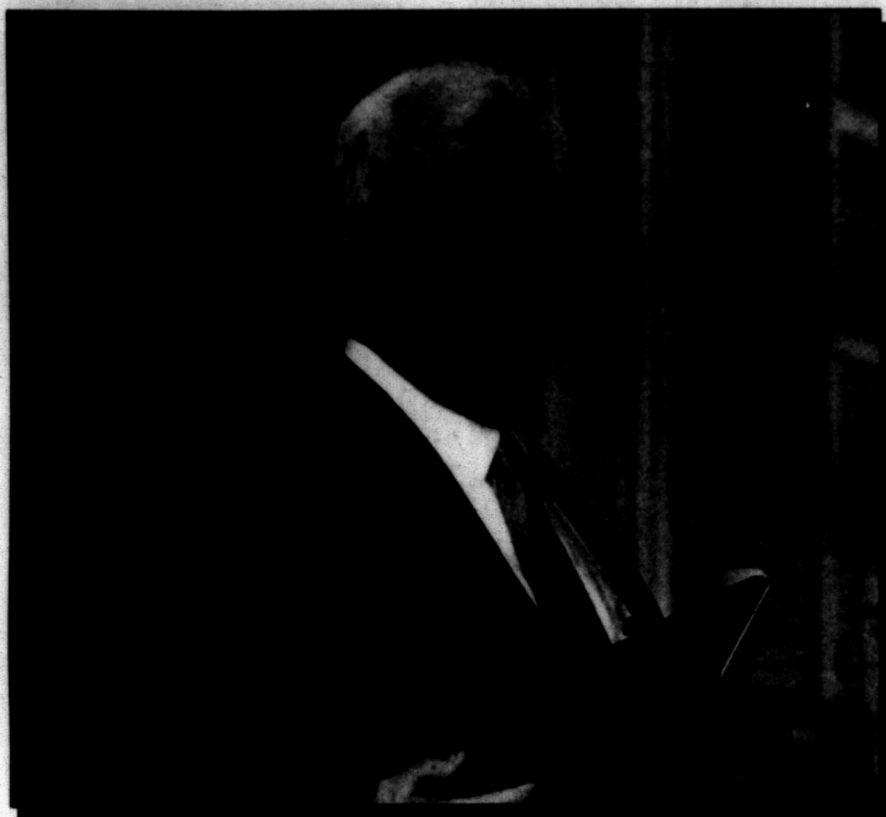
Nicaragua sets ban

Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolanos signed into law Nov. 17 a complete ban on abortions, even those to save the life of the mother.

Nicaragua becomes the 35th country in the world with a comprehensive abortion ban, according to LifeNews.

The measure passed the legislature in late October.

Previously, Nicaraguan law permitted an exception for abortion if three doctors confirmed the procedure is needed to protect a woman's health. Advocates for the new law contended that exception allowed a woman seeking an abortion to convince physicians to cite her health as the reason for the procedure, LifeNews reported.



1. Martin Recognized, BMC

1. Bobby P. Martin, president and CEO of The Peoples Bank of Ripley, was recognized by the Blue Mountain College and the BMC National Alumnae Association during recent Founder's Day activities. Martin has served as a member of BMC's Board of Trustees for 18 years during which time he served eight years on the Executive Committee of the Board and five years as Chair of the Board. During his tenure, Martin has participated in two major events in the College's history. In 2001, he served on the President Search Committee that saw the College inaugurate its first woman president. He also served as Chair of the Board of Trustees in 2005 when the College became a fully co-educational institution of higher learning.
2. William Carey University will present All Things New Homecoming 2007 January 19 and 20 on the Hattiesburg campus. Activities scheduled for Jan. 19 include registration from 11 a.m. until 5 p.m. in the Donna Duck Wheeler Alumni House, followed by a 50 year alumni reunion at 11:30 a.m. and guided tours of new buildings from 1:30 p.m. until 3:30 p.m. The new pictorial history of the university will be signed by editor Donna Wheeler from 3 p.m. until 5 p.m.

Students and alumni will experience Carey Olympics beginning at 4 p.m. followed by the Fiesta Night dinner at 5:30 p.m. The 2007 Miss WCU Pageant begins at 7 p.m. Jan. 20 begins with registration from 8:30 a.m. until 11 a.m. in the alumni house followed by guided tours from 9 a.m. until 10 a.m. and decade reunions from 10 a.m. until 11 a.m. The Bar-B-Que lunch is from 11:30 a.m. until 1 p.m. followed by the Lady Sadlers basketball game where former Homecoming queens will be recognized. The Crusader men take on LSU-Shreveport at 3 p.m. and the presentation of the Homecoming Court will take place during half time. A catfish dinner will take place from 4:30 p.m. until 6 p.m. followed by the Alumni Awards and musical presentation A Salute to Broadway at 6:30 in the auditorium. To register for Homecoming and to reserve a t-shirt contact Ginger Toledo, alumni director, at (601) 318-6561, (800) 962-5991 ext. 561, or ginger.toledo@wmcarey.edu no later than January 5. Tickets for the Miss WCU Pageant on Friday night and the "Salute to Broadway" on Saturday night are \$5 each and can be purchased at the door. Tickets for all meals on Friday and Saturday are available for \$20 or for Saturday only for \$15.

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Peters out to refute 'Word of Faith' ideas

By William H. Perkins Jr.
Editor

Justin Peters believes he has a responsibility to debunk the "Name It and Claim It" preachers that fill American airwaves and the cavernous Word of Faith worship centers around the country.

Peters, staff evangelist at First Church, Vicksburg, has had cerebral palsy all his life. He has watched as people with disabilities flock to services held by modern-day faith healers like Benny Hinn, only to leave disappointed, disheartened, and unhealed.

"If I may humbly say so, I have a unique platform from which to address the 'Health and Wealth/Prosperity' gospel. As a teenager, I was sucked into the movement after having been told by some that God was going to heal me, provided I had enough faith. Obviously, I was not healed.

"There was great potential to do harm in my faith in God. Thanks to the love and support of my family, church family, and of course God Himself, no harm was done — at least not permanently — but I have seen first-hand the harm, both physical and spiritual, that the Prosperity gospel inflicts on so many," he said.

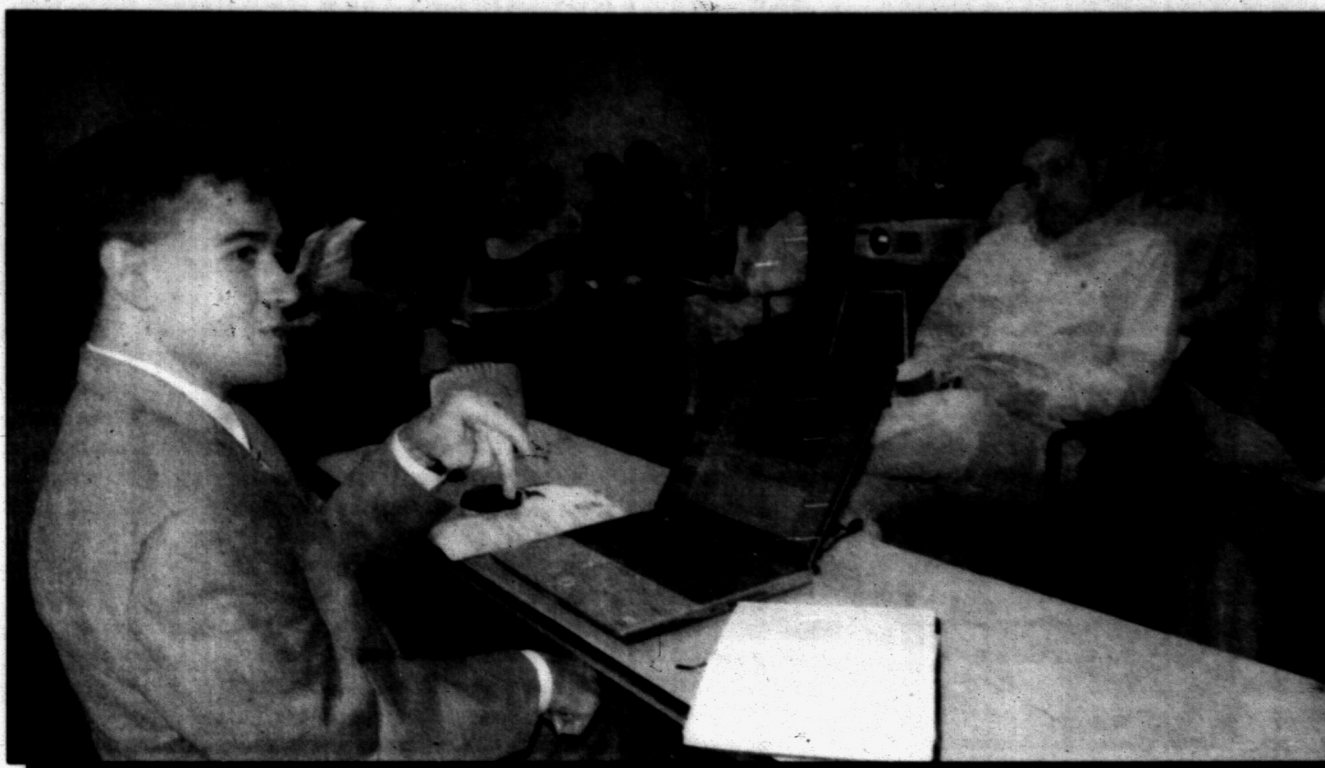
Peters said he feels a call from God to expose the fraud and hypocrisy behind the Word of Faith movement, and he is well-positioned to have an impact. Peters holds a master of divinity degree in Biblical languages from Southwestern Seminary in Ft. Worth, as well as a master of theology degree in New Testament from Southwestern.

For his master of theology thesis, he chose the Word of Faith movement and its attendant "Health and Wealth" message. He studied the theology and techniques of such Word of Faith luminaries as Benny Hinn, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Jesse Duplantis, Creflo Dollar, and Joyce Meyer, to name just a few.

"Their twin motivations are money and power," Peters said. "They want a broad power to increase their ministries, but they also want to have personal influence over people. That's something all preachers have to resist, Baptist or Word of Faith. I love the Lord and I love the Lord's truth. It breaks my heart to see so many people being led astray by wolves in sheep's clothing."

To that end, Peters has put together a three-session seminar entitled, *A Call for Discernment: A Biblical Critique of the Word of Faith Movement*. Since he first presented the seminar in October of 2004, he has done about 25.

"One of the strengths of the seminar is that it is not just me behind the pulpit saying, 'Benny Hinn teaches so and so.' Rather, I have incorporated



SETTING IT STRAIGHT — Justin Peters (left) presents his seminar on the heresies of the 'Word of Faith' movement to a Sunday School class at First Church, Jackson. Peters, a double-graduate of Southwestern Seminary in Ft. Worth, has cerebral palsy and says he has a message for those who believe in the faith-healing, "Name It and Claim It/Prosperity" gospel. (Photo by William H. Perkins Jr.)

over 100 video clips of prominent Word of Faith leaders into a multimedia presentation. This format allows people to see and hear for themselves what these individuals are actually teaching.

"Every point of heresy and unsound doctrine is then, point by point, biblically corrected. People not only learn the error, they also learn the truth."

One of the churches that has invited Peters to present his seminar is Goodrum Church, Vicksburg. "Our people developed an affinity for the truth as we spent time learning Scripture and biblical precepts regarding the cults and cultists of our day who represent themselves as 'Christian,'" said Pastor Bob Martin. "The material was not only relevant but factual and presented in an appropriate and enjoyable manner."

Eddie Davidson, pastor of First Church in Hamilton, AL, said, "Perhaps you underestimate the danger posed by these teachers and their teachings. There is more to their teaching than just a 'Prosperity' gospel. Their teachings come from a cauldron of error brewing a broth of truth seasoned with lies that were born in the heart of Satan himself. I know of no better way to alert your congregation to the darkness that robes itself with light than to have Justin come and present his seminar."

Peters said he fears some Southern Baptists are giving the Word of Faith preachers too much credibility. "This movement is making alarming inroads even in our Baptist churches. This is something that has surprised even me in my travels.

"These prosperity preachers know there are 16 million Southern Baptists, and they

would love to tap into us. They will disguise themselves to make themselves more palatable. They will try to fly in their heresies under our spiritual radar.

"Of all the signs of our Lord's return, the ones which are repeated most often in Scripture are the rise of false Christs and false prophets, and that people would 'no longer endure sound doctrine, but will heap to themselves teachers who tickle the ears. (2 Timothy 4:3).'" Second Peter 2:1-3 is a stunning passage. Every phrase in this passage fits exactly what we are seeing in the modern Word of Faith movement."

Peters said he has been pleased with the impact of the seminar. "There are always — always — people who approach

me afterward to tell me that either they or one of their loved ones has been adversely affected by this movement."

Peters points out that as important as the seminar is to him, it is not the totality of his ministry. "My first love is expository preaching," he said, adding that he has had the honor of conducting 40 revivals in 14 states.

Peters can be reached at 1607 Cherry Street, Vicksburg, MS 39180. Telephone: (601) 636-2493. E-mail: justin@justinpeters.org. Web site: www.justinpeters.org.

Bibliocipher

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NDT VCLML LNST,

LWYCPWTZ ANHA HWM-

RACT YC; BWG S FCGRC-

SIC HANH ISGHMC SL

QWDC WMH WB YC.

EMUC CSQAH: BWGHZ-LSJ

Clue: B = F

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Warren trip to Syria results in tidal wave of criticism

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP) — Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose-Driven Life* and pastor of the 30,000-member Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., is under fire for a recent trip to Syria during which he allegedly criticized American foreign policy in the Middle East and praised the nation's Baathist leadership for fostering a climate of religious toleration.

Warren, who was on a three-nation trip to promote outreach and humanitarian efforts in early November, met with several leaders in the country, including President Bashar al-Assad, Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallim, and Grand Mufti Sheikh Badr al-Din Hassoun, an Islamic cleric.

The Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), the government's chief propaganda outlet, posted four separate stories about the visit that, according to Warren, contained comments he did not make.

One SANA posting claimed that Warren addressed "Syrian-American relations" in a meeting with Assad.

"The American delegation stressed that the American administration is mistaken not to hold dialogue with Syria," SANA reported. "The importance of dialogue among religions and achieving the just and comprehensive peace in the region which leads for stability and prosperity were emphasized during the meeting."

"Pastor Warren hailed the religious coexistence, tolerance and stability that the Syrian society is enjoying due to the wise leadership of President al-Assad, asserting that he will convey the true image about Syria to the American people."

SANA also reported that Warren, in his meeting with Moallim, had concluded that "Syria wants peace, and Muslims and Christians live in this country jointly and peacefully since more than a thousand years, and this is not new for Syria." The same report included a statement attributed to Warren that he would return to America to tell the people that the "idea which had been shaped" about Syria did not "reflect the truth." The report said Warren thought Americans should go to Syria "and realize her nice people and visit her wonderful and historical ruins."

In a meeting with Hassoun in Damascus, SANA reported that Warren spoke of the need to spread a "culture of amity, peace and coexistence instead of the 'clash of civilizations.'" That report also claimed that Warren believed there would be no peace in the region without Syrian assistance, and that "80 percent of the American people rejected what the U.S. administration is doing in Iraq and considered the U.S. policy in the Mideast as wrong."

Hassoun reportedly asked Warren to convey to the American people "the real image of Syria," which the cleric concluded was peaceful. He also said the American government had "distorted" Syria's image before the world.

Warren criticized

Warren's comments, as reported by SANA, have angered numerous religious and political conservatives in the United States.

Mark Tooley, a columnist for *FrontPageMagazine.com*, the online political journal of the David Horowitz Freedom Center, wrote Nov. 15 that Warren, like other preachers who delve into politics, had been naive in his dealings with the Syrian government. Tooley, who directs the United Methodist committee at the Institute on Religion and Democracy, said he doubted that the comments attributed to Warren by



WARREN IN SYRIA — California pastor Rick Warren, in a November visit to Syria, meets with one of the Mideast nation's top clerics, Grand Mufti Sheikh Badr al-Din Hassoun. Warren has been blasted for what he said were inaccurate comments reported by the official Syrian news agency. (BP photo by the Syrian Arab News Agency)

SANA were entirely accurate, but said Warren's presence there was a propaganda victory for the nation.

In Warren's conversations with Assad and other Syrian leaders, Tooley wrote, SANA did not report Warren mentioning "Syria's one-party police state, its political prisoners, its chambers of torture, its support for Hezbollah terrorism in Lebanon, and its continued devotion to the destruction of Israel."

While Tooley wrote that Syria was tolerant compared to Saudi Arabia, where conversion to Christianity is punishable by death, there are still significant problems for the nation's Christian minority and political dissidents.

Tooley said the country is one where "only the ruling Baathist Party and its allies are permitted to win elections, where all news media are owned or controlled by the government, where independent labor unions are prohibited, where universities must proclaim Baathist Party policies, where clerics are appointed by the government, where the president by law must be Muslim, and where women's limited rights are governed by Islamic shari'a law, even though the government is ostensibly secular."

Tooley also wrote that Christians cannot preach to non-Christians, and that authorities have blocked the construction of any new Christian school for four decades. Additionally, he wrote, all schools must have Muslim principals and all mosques are under government control.

Joseph Farah, editor of the *WorldNetDaily* website, called Warren's actions "purpose driven terrorism" in his daily column Nov. 21. He also wrote that Warren, like the Apostle Paul, had been blinded on the road to Damascus.

"Warren went to Syria and could find no persecution of Christians. He could find no persecution of Jews. He could find no evidence of extremism. He could find no evidence of the sponsorship of terrorism," Farah wrote on his website.

"Despite the temporary loss of vision that prevented him from seeing any evil in the totalitarian police state, Warren's hearing was apparently not affected — for his ears were tickled by what he heard and apparently accepted lock, stock and barrel from the second-generation dictator, Bashar Assad, and his state-approved mufti."

Farah publicly challenged Warren,

calling him a traitor to his country. Farah recounted that Warren had issued a response via e-mail stating that he visited Syria at the invitation of a neighbor. Farah quoted Warren as saying that he "did not pretend to be a diplomat" and that he had been warned by the U.S. State Department to expect a "PR blast" from the Syrian government.

Warren responds

In a letter to the members of his congregation, Warren encouraged his church not to believe "everything you read on the Internet or hear in the media."

"Friends, I am aware that inaccuracies, misquotes, and misperceived motivations get reported about me in the press daily. Most of the time, I just ignore them," Warren wrote, reminding his congregation that Jesus told His disciples in John 15:18 that the world would hate those who followed Him.

Warren explained to his congregation that the trip was an effort to promote the church's global P.E.A.C.E. plan in Germany, Syria, and Rwanda, where Warren has already spent a significant amount of time. With regard to Syria, Warren said he wished he had been better prepared for the trip.

"We would have handled some meetings differently, watched our words more closely, and been more aware of the agenda of their state press," Warren wrote to his congregation. "As we left, the official state-controlled Syrian news agency issued some press releases that sounded like I was a politician negotiating the Iraq war by praising the Syrian President and everything else in Syria! Of course, that's ridiculous, but it created a stir among bloggers who tend to editorialize before verifying the truth. Does it seem ironic to you that people who distrust Syria are now believing Syrian press releases?"

Warren said he explained the Saddleback P.E.A.C.E. plan to Assad during his meeting with the president and that Assad gave the church permission to send teams to Syria.

"We wanted to just slip in and out, but that's nearly impossible for me to do anymore. It's been a learning experience," Warren wrote. He also encouraged his congregation to read a press release his publicity agent had

issued about the trip to Syria. In that release, publicist A. Larry Ross said Warren had discussed religious freedom and academic exchange with Syrian leaders.

"Contrary to reports by the official state-controlled Syrian news agency, Dr. Warren was in Syria to meet with and encourage the country's key Christian leaders and to promote religious freedom," Ross said in the news release.

"Leaders who met with Dr. Warren included the Patriarchs of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church; the leader of the coalition of Evangelical Churches of Syria; and the pastor of the world's oldest standing church dating back to 315 A.D.," Ross pointed out.

Ross said Warren's visit to the country was "neither official nor political." As for his supposed criticism of American policy in the region, the news release quoted Warren as saying there should be "no doubt about our support for President Bush, our troops in Iraq and the war on terror."

Ross also explained Warren's comment that 80% of the American public wanted U.S. forces to withdraw from Iraq. When asked about whether American public opinion had turned against the war, the news release stated that Warren replied, "Yes. The New York Times reported that 80% of Americans indicated in election day exit polls they now oppose keeping troops in Iraq."

Ross noted, however, that Warren's team was told by a Syrian official that it would be a mistake for American troops to immediately pull out.

Warren: Syria tolerant

Warren did claim, according to the news release, that Syria had been tolerant in protecting freedom to worship for Jews and Christians in Syria and in welcoming thousands of Christian refugees from Iraq. He said the government had been far more tolerant than others such as those in Burma, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, and other countries named in the annual report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

"Muslims and Christians have lived side by side in Syria for more than a thousand years, often with mosques and churches built next to each other. What can we learn from them?" Warren asked. "I believe it is a mistake to not talk to nations considered hostile; isolation and silence has never solved conflict anywhere — whether between spouses or between nations."

The U.S. State Department, in its annual report on religious liberty, described Syria as generally tolerant but controlling of various religious groups in the country. The nation, according to the report, "officially disavows sectarianism of any kind" and has also been concerned with curtailing the spread of radical Islam, primarily out of its desire to protect its socialist government.

The security services were constantly alert for any possible political threat to the State, and all groups, religious and nonreligious, were subject to surveillance and monitoring by government security services. The Government considered militant Islam in particular a threat to the regime and followed closely the practice of its adherents. The Government has allowed many mosques to be built; however, it monitored and controlled sermons and often closed mosques between prayers," the State Department report said.

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

Faith That Works

Hebrews 10:32-12:2

By Gloria Lofton

"Without faith we are as stained glass windows in the dark." - Anonymous

How true this statement is. Without faith there is no purpose to life. I am so thankful God loved me enough to bring me the gift of saving faith through His Son Jesus Christ. In this unit of study we will focus on Life-Changing Gifts.

When someone gives us a gift, we accept it freely and are quick to send a note of thanks saying how much we appreciate the thoughtfulness, and then put the gift to use for whatever purpose it was intended. In the same way we should thank God for life-changing gifts He has given us to freely, and use them for His glory.

In Hebrews 10:32-39 the writer is asking the early Christians to remember the former days after being enlightened, how they rejoiced when their property was taken, knowing what they had in Christ was far better, and it would last forever. "Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a greater reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet in a little while, He who is coming, He who is coming will not delay, My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him. We are not of those who shrink back in destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul." (NASB)



Lofton

Our study this week is "Faith That Works." Where does our faith come from? Faith has to have a source. Webster gives this definition for source: (1) A spring or fountain that is the starting point of a stream; (2) A thing or place from which something comes or is gotten. Faith comes from God as a gift, yet it is also our response to God. No one has a self-produced faith. God Himself activates faith in the hearer of the word, enabling the believer to become faithful to Christ. God never forces His gift of faith on anyone, but gives freely to all who will accept it.

Hebrews 11: 1-2 says "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained a good report." (NASB) As the writer began his roll call of some of the greatest men of faith, we are encouraged by these saints of old who kept the faith. Not only did they keep the faith, but were obedient, had courage, and endured

until death. As we thank God for our faith let us remember faith is more than a belief. It is a personal and dynamic relationship with God. We are to express our faith relationship with action. Action that will speak to the lost world of our faith in Christ.

Sometimes when life's circumstances seem to contradict what we believe about God's love and power, we must continue to trust God. We must remember enduring pain can require more faith than escaping pain. Having faith doesn't guarantee a carefree life. On occasions we may face some form of persecution from the world. In Matthew 5:11-12, Jesus says "Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, on account of me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (NASB) When persecution comes we are to seek God's approval, not the world's.

It's so easy for Christians to get caught up in the secular world. It may start innocently,

but before we realize it, we are so busy with things of no lasting value our spiritual lives suffer. Even in our churches we get so busy with organized activities until sometimes we need to stop and ask God if we are doing what pleases Him. In Hebrews 12:1-2a we read: "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every encumbrance and the sins which so easily entangle us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." (NASB) We as believers need to rid ourselves of sinful thoughts, attitudes, or practices that hinder our relationship with God. We must keep our eyes on Jesus who is the creator of our faith, for He is the only one who can complete our faith. May we ever consider He who endured such persecutions for our sake, lest we become weary and lose heart? Join me in praying that we as receivers of God's gift of faith will understand how it works and share this knowledge with the lost world.

Lofton is a member of Willow Grove Church, Collins.

EXPLORE THE BIBLE Seizing New Opportunities

Ezra 1:1-3:13

By Tim Alexander

Opportunities come to us in small ways everyday. Consider these quotes about opportunities: "It is often hard to distinguish between hard knocks in life and those of opportunities." "I was seldom able to see an opportunity until it was had ceased to be one." We all have had the door of opportunity open our way and we have walked past the door of opportunity failing to see the door that was so near to us.

These lesson passages are about the Jews' return from exile to rebuild God's temple in Jerusalem. The emphasis is on God's people taking advantage of opportunities to participate in the Lord's work. The lesson encourages adults to seize God-given opportunities to participate in His work.

Many believers have earnestly sought to serve the Lord but

have been ineffective in their service. Perhaps they were not given proper training or did not exercise spiritual disciplines that help believers become effective. Perhaps believers have not allowed the fruit of the spirit to grow in their lives. The Israelites disobedience led to their failures and brought divine discipline. What is true with the Israelites is true for us! Living in disobedience causes fruitless Christian living. This is not pleasing to the Lord; He wants faithful obedience and service. He continues to open new doors of opportunities for us to participate in His work!

1. Respond to God-Given Opportunities (Ezra 1:1-6)

Proverbs reminds us that the "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water; he turneth it whithersoever he will." It is refresh-



Alexander

ing to know that the Lord is still on the throne and directing history to the end of time and beyond. The Lord moved the heart of King Cyrus to make a decree. The decree allowed the Jews from exile to go back to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel. King Cyrus' decree allowing God's people to return to their homeland was not given "the first year" of his reign over the Medes and Persians (550 B.C.) but in 538 B.C., "the first year" of his reign over Babylon. People responded to the God-given opportunity to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the altar and temple by going and giving. The people enthusiastically began rebuilding the temple and resumed sacrifices. When given the opportunity to serve Him, His people should respond with joy, gratitude, and determination.

2. Recognize the Priority of Worship (Ezra 3:1-3)

Worship is such a vital part of every church. The small Jewish community faced many prob-

lems, but they had their priorities in order. They emphasized worship by building the altar then the temple. The term "Israelites" in 3:1 is applied to the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah taken captive to Babylon (and their descendants). The Northern Kingdom of Israel virtually disappeared after it fell in 722 B.C., so the term Israelites came to designate God's people. Ezra 3:4-5 further illustrated the priority of cooperate worship. In these verses, both include public and private worship as having priority for believers. While being tempted in the desert Jesus said, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."

The feast of Tabernacles occurred five days after the Day of Atonement, and lasted for a week. It was a general rejoicing (Lev. 23:33-43) and assumed special character in the time of Ezra (Neh. 8:13-18) and continued to be observed in the time of Jesus.

3. Rejoicing in the Lord's Help (Ezra 3:10-11)

There was a remarkable amount of joy upon laying the foundation of the Temple.

The people who were rejoicing knew the misery of having no temple. The Lord's help was evident in laying the temple's foundation. The people's "praise and thanksgiving to the Lord" (3:11) expressed their joy and also publicly glorified God. We need to celebrate victories. Often we are too busy checking off our "to do" list to pause, rejoice and praise God for the mighty way he is working in our lives.

Take the time to look around your world today. What opportunities are awaiting you? Opportunities to serve God in a fresh, new way! Maybe there are opportunities to witness to a co-worker or neighbor and you've just never acted upon that invitation. Maybe God is leading you to start a new career or a new business that would bless you and many others. Take advantage of our God-given opportunities to praise and serve Him! Go on, seize it!

Alexander is Minister of Education, Harrisburg Church, Tupelo.

Guidelines for submitting news and photographs

The Baptist Record is pleased to publish news and photographs of special events that take place in cooperating churches of the Mississippi Baptist Convention.

News submitted for publication in The Baptist Record must be either (a) typewritten, (b) neatly printed on 8 1/2 by 11-inch paper, or (c) neatly printed on standardized forms provided by the newspaper. All articles must be received in writing; no articles will be accepted over the telephone.

News may be submitted electronically to the address below, and must be contained in the message segment of an e-mail form. Due to increasing virus threats, no text attachments will be accepted.



Photograph attachments are permissible. Please make articles concise. Include the who, what, when, where details of the story, along with a contact person's address and telephone number. Photographs may be color or black and white. Instant photos and digital printouts

are not reproducible. Digital photos may be used if submitted as a JPEG file via either (a) e-mail, (b) three-and-a-half inch floppy disk, or (c) CD. Photos must be clear, sharp, and well-lighted. All news items are subject to editing, and all photographs are subject to crop-

ping. Photographs must depict people. No landscape, building, or object-only photographs will be printed. News items and/or photographs can be published one time only. Deadline for submitting news is one week prior to requested publication date.

Articles that are not date-sensitive will be published on a space-available basis. Requests to return photographs must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Submit news and photographs to The Baptist Record, P.O. Box 530, Jackson, MS 39205-0530. FAX: (601) 292-3330. E-mail: baptistrecord@mbcb.org.

Baptists quick to offer assistance to N.C. storm victims



STORM'S AFTERMATH — Fire and rescue personnel search for victims at the Old Farm Estates trailer park in the Armour community of Columbus County, North Carolina, after a tornado struck early Thursday, Nov. 16. (Photo by Randall Hill/Myrtle Beach Sun-News/MCT)

RIEGELWOOD, N.C. (BP and local reports) — North Carolina Baptists were quick to respond when the state's second-deadliest tornado in 50 years swept through a small community, killing eight people, injuring 20 and destroying dozens of homes.

"We are running a small feeding operation and have some disaster relief chaplains in place, and we'll be assisting the survivors with going through the debris that was left by the storm," Gaylon Moss, disaster relief director for the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, told Baptist Press.

The feeding unit is set up at Riegelwood Church, about 20 miles west of Wilmington. A 1,000-foot-wide tornado struck Riegelwood in the early morning Nov. 16, carving a path more than a half-mile wide and almost a mile long, according to the Star-News newspaper in Wilmington. The sights of scattered bodies, heaping debris and flipped cars are being described as a "major catastrophe" and "total devastation."

The same storm has earlier pushed through Mississippi, causing several injuries and widespread damage but no fatalities. The Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief Task Force was not activated.

Among the dead in North Carolina were two cousins, both under the age of 12, who had been dropped by the tornado near a pond, the Star-News said. Chris Batten, the Columbus County sheriff, said about 20 people were taken to area hospitals with injuries and about 30 homes were leveled.

Residents were taken by surprise Thursday morning when they heard a loud rumbling sound and looked to see a huge funnel cloud bearing down on them. Some sought refuge in closets and under tables, the Star-News reported. Others had no time to flee. The National Weather

Service estimates most of the damage occurred just eight minutes after a tornado warning was issued for the area at 6:29 a.m.

"There was no warning. There was no time. It just came out from nowhere," Cissy Kennedy, who lives in a neighborhood hit by the tornado, told the Star-News.

The tornado was part of a strong system of storms that moved through the South leaving a two-day death toll of 12 people. As it moved north, power outages disrupted Amtrak service in the Northeast corridor and people had to be rescued from cars in rising water in Maryland, the Associated Press reported.

About 45,000 customers in North Carolina lost power Nov. 16, AP said, but crews were able to restore most of it by mid-afternoon. About 100 Riegelwood residents were left homeless by the tornado, and some were seeking shelter at a local elementary school.

Moss, the disaster relief director, said no members of Riegelwood Church were directly affected by the twister but they were working to minister to the community.

A hospital spokesman told the Star-News that families were "in distress" over trying to locate missing family members and grieving the loss of those who died.

"We have two chaplains in Riegelwood providing spiritual and emotional care to emergency workers and survivors," Moss said.

Other Baptist volunteers are working alongside the victims to make sense of the debris.

"The first step would just be to help them dig through the rubble, to be there to offer an extra set of hands to help them sort through what they have left and try to help them through that," Moss said.

Panel: Evangelicals should change approach to news media

WASHINGTON (BP) — Not only do the news media need to change in order to report more accurately and justly on evangelical Christians, but evangelicals themselves can do things differently to affect their portrayal, panelists at a recent theological meeting said.

A panel consisting of a Southern Baptist ethics leader, a Christian radio talk show host, an ABC News producer, and former religion writers for two major news magazines discussed evangelicals and the media during a Nov. 17 session of the annual Evangelical Theological Society meeting at the Washington Hilton.

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission in Nashville, and Janet Parshall, host of Janet Parshall's America, said there is media bias but evangelicals could help themselves by choosing what shows to appear on and what topics to debate.

Land said he thinks "the general performance of the media in this country at the national level has gone down over the last 20 years and is more biased and is more sensational."

Parshall said, "I've often said to some of my peers that if we stopped [playing] the role of the blow-up clown that maybe we wouldn't be so stupid in the media. ... I think the challenge for evangelicals in particular is to probably exercise that muscle known as discernment a bit more and to start being a little bit more judicious about the kinds and types of debates we do engage in ... the ones that are really reflective of biblical truth and moral absolutes, the ones that really will be reflective first and foremost, last and always of Jesus Christ. And if it isn't, then maybe we should stay home."

Land said he has turned down invitations to appear on television programs panelists described vari-

ously as "shouting matches" and "food fight" shows.

"[F]irst of all, the media's responsibility is to get it right," Land said in a comment endorsed by the other panelists. "They need to know as much as they can about the people they are covering, and they need to do as good a job as they can of being as balanced as they can."

"Balanced journalism is not getting the two most strident voices on the opposite ends of the perspective that you can find and have them shout at each other for 15 minutes," he said.

While journalists have a responsibility to get the news right, evangelicals have a responsibility "to sort of keep a dialogue open," said Jeanmarie Condon, a senior producer for ABC News.

"You know, you have to engage us with a little bit more respect, I think, just as you would like the media to engage" evangelicals, she said.

Parshall challenged evangelicals "to try to encourage the media when they do the right thing and also to let them know when we think they do the wrong thing."

The news media could help by adding evangelicals to their staffs and by listening to those who faithfully represent the evangelical community, Land and Parshall said.

"I do think there is an extreme dearth, an extreme dearth, in the electronic and the print media at the national level of people who are serious evangelicals," Land said. "There's just no question about that. What difference does that make? Because human beings can never be completely objective. It makes a difference, for instance, whether you believe there is an absolute truth or you don't believe there is an absolute truth."

Parshall said, "Number one, get somebody on retainer on the networks who knows this stuff. Let him be your point man or woman on these issues. Hey, what does the Bible say about x, y, z? What does the church believe about x, y, z? And number two, how about hiring more reporters with a biblicentric world view?"

Land said he would encourage the news media not to invite people in who will tell them about evangelicals "but actually have some evangelicals in" to learn about them.

Condon said she believes the three-fold role of ABC and the rest of the news media is:

- "To take seriously the fact that religion is a major mover and motivator for people all around the world and that it needs to be considered carefully in our coverage of almost any story."

- "Not to treat it like an anthropological study, but to cover it from the inside, to look at what ideas people are debating, what causes conflict within various movements, what people agree on, what's bothering them, what people are talking about around their Sunday dinner table."

- "And the third thing is to provoke discussion."

Condon recalled an incident that happened when she was helping report on the 1993 standoff between the Branch Davidians and the FBI near Waco, Texas.

She produced a documentary on the event and "had a lot in it about ... what the people actually believed inside the compound. And some of my bosses were saying, 'Well, that stuff's boring.' There's like an entire country west of the Hudson River that know these Bible passages and talk about them all the time to each other. They don't think this is boring. After a while, people started to believe us."

Jeffery Sheler, freelance journalist and former religion writer for U.S. News and World Report, said he believes the news media have improved their coverage of religion in the last 10-20 years, but he acknowledged evangelicals tend to be "stereotyped much more frequently than a lot of other groups."

"I'm saying there's a learning curve here, that things are getting better, not quite fast enough to suit me, but things are improving," he said.

Panel moderator Darrell Bock, professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, asked the panelists what kind of role the media have in modeling a proper type of dialogue for society.

Sheler said he believes much of the coarse dialogue is a result of the need by cable news operations to fill 24 hours of programming.

"Of course," the media should model the right kind of dialogue, Sheler said. "Are they doing a good job of it? Not very, and I don't know what they do about it."

Richard Ostling, a panelist, recently retired religion writer for the Associated Press and longtime religion writer for Time magazine, agreed that "the public discourse is very coarsened in our society," but he pointed to evangelist Billy Graham, not a news organization, as a model.

"Graham has always turned away wrath," he said. "He's always had a charming way of not responding personally with questions and attacks and so on. His charming way, I think, of dealing with public controversy and debate and back-and-forth probably helped the evangelical movement a lot and is very different from what passes for religious and political discourse in a lot of American life today."